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U.S. withholds judgment in pope plot

By John McCaslin
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The Reagan administration's "no-judgment" position on the plot to assassinate Pope John Paul II remains unchanged, despite remarks last week by a senior member of President Reagan's National Security Council staff who suggested Soviet involvement in the shooting.

Mr. Reagan's NSC adviser, Constantine C. Menges, was quoted by several congressional aides as saying in a White House briefing on administration policy that the Soviet Union "used the Bulgarians to shoot the pope."

Mr. Menges' comment, reported in The Washington Post but dismissed over the weekend by the White House, marked the first time a high-ranking administration official had publicly linked the Soviets to the May 1981 shooting in St. Peter's Square that wounded Pope John Paul II.

Contacted by The Washington Times yesterday, Mr. Menges said the congressional aides "misunderstood what I had said."

"Something is being made of this that wasn't there," he said.

Mr. Menges recalled saying that the Soviets, "if they decided to assassinate the pope, would tend to use a partner like the Bulgarians."

"I specifically never used the words 'shoot the pope,'" Mr. Menges said.

The NSC aide also said the briefing, set up by the White House public liaison office, was "not on-the-record but for employees of the U.S. government."

White House deputy press secretary Robert B. Sims said it appears that Mr. Menges was speaking in a "hypothetical

sense" in his address to some 75 House and Senate aides at the Old Executive Office Building.

"We continue to cooperate with the Italian authorities [investigating the shooting] and have no judgment to make while they conduct what we consider to be a thorough process," said Mr. Sims, adding, "That's the government position."

The administration continues its "hands-off" stance on what has been dubbed one of the century's more sensational cases. Italian authorities have indicted three Bulgarian government officials on conspiring with four Turks, including Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turkish terrorist convicted of the actual shooting.

Although Italian authorities have launched an in-depth investigation of a "Bulgarian connection" between Agca and the Soviet Union, no one has yet proven a major international conspiracy in the assassination attempt.

The Soviet Union openly acts as the backbone of the Bulgarian intelligence service.

In recent developments, however, the Italian magistrate confirmed reports that there could have been a second gunman on the scene of the shooting that day in St. Peter's Square.

Although Agca initially claimed to have acted alone in the shooting, he has since maintained that he was directed by members of the Bulgarian secret service. An Italian prosecutor said the order was issued by the Soviet KGB, which, at that time, was under the leadership of the late Yuri Andropov.

Western observers believe that the Soviet motive in the assassination plot was to crush Poland's rising Solidarity movement, which was supported by the Polish pope.